Pragmatic underspecification of tag question evidentials in Mi'kmaq

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Puzzle: Mi'kmaq (Algonquian) has a verbal suffix 
\[-s(\ddot{i})p(n)\] which receives tag question interpretation
in a sentence. This question tag suffix is \textit{prima facie} composed of the direct and indirect evidential suffixes 
\[-p(n)\] and 
\[-s(n)\] (all Mi'kmaq examples from Inglis 2002).

\begin{align*}
\text{(1) } & I'-\text{wape}'kî-p. & \text{(2) } & I'-\text{wape}'kî-s. \\
& \text{PAST-\text{white-\text{DIRECT}}} & & \text{PAST-\text{white-\text{IND}}} \\
& \text{'}It used to be white.' & & \text{'}It used to be white, so I'm told.' \\
\text{(3) } & I'-\text{wape}'k-sîp. & \text{PAST-\text{white-\text{TAG}}} & \text{'}It used to be white, didn't it?'
\end{align*}

We provide an account of the tag question suffix which derives its pragmatic properties from the
interaction of the direct and indirect evidential suffixes.

Background on tag questions: Although little formal work has been done on the semantics of tag
questions, the literature on the subject assumes that they have the same logical form as negative polar
questions (Reese & Asher 2010). Negative polar questions are observed to differ from positive
questions in that they convey a backgrounded speaker attitude, or bias: that the speaker at some point
had expected a positive response to the question (Givon 1979, Ladd 1981, Horn 1989 et al.). This bias
is treated on some accounts as following from the interaction of the semantic content of an
interrogative sentence and pragmatic principles (Romero & Han 2004). Other treatments take biased
questions to be a complex speech-act type (Reese & Asher 2007, 2010), \textit{assert }\bullet \textit{question}, carrying a
hybrid illocutionary force: the sentence asserts \(p\), and questions \(?\neg p\).

Two readings for Mi'kmaq tag questions: Negative polar questions in English with preposed
negation, like their counterparts with low negation, convey the sense that the speaker previously
expected or believed in the likelihood of a positive response. However, they are not pragmatically
equivalent: this sense is much stronger for negative questions with preposed negation than for those
with low negation (4) (Romero & Han 2004). Romero & Han account for this difference by proposing
that preposed negation introduces the epistemic operator \textit{VERUM FOCUS}, which necessarily gives rise to a
non-cancelable 'positive epistemic implicature.'

\begin{align*}
\text{(4) } & \text{Scenario: The speaker is organizing a party and she is in charge of supplying all the} \\
& \text{non-alcoholic beverages for teetotalers. The speaker is going through a list of people that} \\
& \text{are invited. She has no previous belief or expectation about their drinking habits.} \\
& \text{A: Jane and Mary do not drink.} \\
& \text{S: OK. What about John? Does he not drink (either)?} \\
& \text{S': # OK. What about John? Doesn't he drink (either)?} & \text{(Romero & Han)}
\end{align*}

Mi'kmaq tag questions display the same pragmatic properties as negative polar questions with both
high and low negation, depending on context.

\begin{align*}
\text{(5) } & \text{[while looking at a closed window in a room which is cold]} \\
& Panta'\text{tek-}sîp tuo'\text{puti}. \\
& \text{open-\text{TAG} window}
\end{align*}
'The window, it was open, wasn't it?'

(6)  I'-wape'k-sɨp to'q.

PAST-white-TAG COMMUNITY.KNOWLEDGE

'It used to be white, didn't it? [everyone knows that]'

(neighborhood history tells me that it used to be white)

In (5), the speaker conveys that she expects confirmation that her statement is true, while being open to contradiction. In (6), however, compatibility with the to'q particle shows that the speaker holds a propositional belief that the object in question used to be white.

**Proposal:** We propose that the -s(ɨ)p(n) suffix is pragmatically underspecified such that it yields two readings: 1) an inference that the speaker expects a positive response to the prejacent, and 2) a non-cancelable inference that the speaker believes the prejacent to be true. We propose that these readings result from differing scope interactions of the direct and indirect evidential suffixes that comprise the question tag suffix. In the first reading, the statement expresses the speaker's belief about the evidential relation of the addressee to the proposition expressed by the prejacent: belief about what reportative evidence with respect to the proposition should be. In the second reading, the speaker is making an assertion about her own epistemic state with respect to a reported proposition.

**Observations and implications:** The proposed analysis yields the two readings as the result of the scope interaction of two overt morphemes, rather than by introducing an extra operator. It also captures the intuition of Reese & Asher that biased questions occupy an intermediate position between question and assertion. We note that opposite polarity tag questions in English also carry both readings and propose that prosody plays a role in disambiguating them. The analysis also correctly predicts that statements with the -s(ɨ)p(n) suffix fail as alternative questions, and predicts a gap in the evidential paradigm: the tag-question suffix is not available for verbs in the first person, as this would create vacuous interpretations on both readings.

**Selected references**